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Theorising Global Business Spaces

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THEORIZING GLOBAL BUSINESS SPACES

by

Andrew Jones

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ABSTRACT. Over the last decade, geographers have paid a great deal of attention to TNCs and global production networks (GPNs) in the global economy, to the emergence of a mobile transnational business class and also to the development of global or globalizing cities. All three literatures have made important contributions to understanding the spatiality of global economic activity, but each adopts a fairly discreet theoretical and empirical focus. This article aims to outline a number of theoretical dimensions for thinking about how these key strands to the globalization debate can be brought together through the concept of 'global business spaces'. It will propose a framework for understanding the spatialities of global economic activity that seeks to capture the complex interaction of material, social, organizational and virtual spaces that form the context through which it is constituted. With reference to business travel as key form of economic practice which plays a central role in (re)producing these spaces, it assesses how these emerging spaces of global economic activity present problems for the conceptual categories commonly used by both urban and economic geographers. In so doing, it proposes a series of ways in which a different research agenda can produce new insight into the complex forms of social practice at the centre of global economic activity.

Keywords: globalization; space; business travel; global cities; transnational firms; economic practices

Introduction

The globalization debate has been characterized by a now enormous – and still growing – volume of literature across the social sciences examining the development of transnational firms (TNCs) as key agents in propagating global economic interconnectedness and in developing global production networks (GPNs) (Borrus *et al.* 2000; Gereffi 2005; Dicken 2007). At the same time, another strand of the globalization debate has simultaneously produced an equally substantial literature on the role and nature of global cities, regions and other material spaces of economic activity in the global economy (Harvey 2000; Sassen 2001; Castells 2001). Yet both these ‘production-centred’ and ‘urban-centred’ strands to the globalization debate also share common ground with third, more recent, sociological literature concerned with emergence of a transnational business class (Sklair 2001; Cohen 2006), increasing international business mobility and the evolving nature of transnational working practices (Harvey *et al.* 1999; Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge 2007).

Until recently, however, there has been only limited interaction between these various strands to the globalization literature. All adopt a certain epistemological focus for understanding the nature of the contemporary globalizing economy (firms, places or social actors) that only intermittently strays into the conceptual territory of the other strands. The purpose of this article is to argue that a more holistic epistemological approach is needed and to seek to bring together these different approaches together to develop a multi-dimensional spatial epistemological framework that is better able to theorize the spatial reconfiguration of economic activity which is occurring in the current era of globalization. In so doing, it develops a series of arguments about how theories of business travel and mobility (the subject of this special issue) need to be situated in a wider theoretical framework that seeks to better understand the nature of the spaces in which globalized business activity occurs. Drawing together number of different strands social scientific literature concerned with conceptions of space (Lefebvre 1991; Amin 2002; Buchanan 2005; Massey 2005), the built environment (Dovey 1999; Harvey 2000; King 2004), organizational theory (Felstead *et al.* 2005; Taylor and Spicer 2007; Dale and Burrell 2008), mobility (Sheller and Urry 2003; Urry 2006) and economic practices (Sklair 2005; Yeung 2005; Jones 2008), its central argument is that the different spatial epistemologies being used to frame understandings of economic activity within the social sciences need reconfiguring if they are to capture both the nature

and significance of the spaces in which business (i.e. economic) practices are undertaken in the context of contemporary globalization.

Two key related epistemological propositions underpin this position. First, current approaches to economic globalization have yet to sufficiently capture the complex evolving relationships between actors and the multiple ‘spaces’ that constitute them in a globalizing world economy. Geographical thought has for some time sought to question the simplistic territorial conceptions of scale (Marston *et al.* 2005; Leitner and Miller 2007; Nicholls 2009) along with the idea that economic activity is ‘contained’ in places or territories (Yeung 1998; Bathelt and Glückler 2003; Dicken 2003). However, whilst recent debates about GPNs (Henderson *et al.* 2002; Lim 2006; Pan 2009) or the ‘embeddedness’ of regional clusters (Hite 2003; Hess 2004) have begun to theorize the interrelationships between place, materiality, territory and the economy, ongoing economic interconnectedness requires a more radical reconfiguration of how the different dimensions to global economic space are conceptualized.

Second, and following on, the more recent so-called ‘relational and practice turn’ in economic geography (Bathelt and Glückler 2003; Yeung 2005) has echoed shifts in other social science disciplines in questioning the extent to which agency in the global economy can be effectively understood as the exclusive property of individuals or organizations (see also Allen 2003). Amin (2002) points to the difficulties in pinning down agency in the contemporary globalized world where in fact social relations (and hence actors and agents) ‘perforate’ many scales. Furthermore, the integration of actor-network perspectives (Law and Hassard 1994; Murdoch 1998; Latour 2005) has developed the argument that economic agency may be better conceptualised as a network effect, emergent from the wide range of associations that enable ‘actors’ to act and shape economic outcomes (c.f. Jones 2008). This shift has increasingly demonstrated that economic success or failure is thus not easily attributed to the properties of firms treated as a black box unit of analysis, or as discreet entities whose actions and development trajectory exist in an atomised form (Dicken and Malmberg 2001; Yeung 2005).

The implication of these arguments is that there is a need to conceptualize the nature of ‘business space’ beyond a focus on physical offices, factories or other production facilities which are located in demarcated places or territories. Equally, key individual actors such as global business travellers are not isolated, discreet agents whose activities can be understood

without considering the range of associations with people, things and places that support their capacity to act. My central argument is that these insights destabilise the existing set of spatial categories (e.g. the local, regional and global scales) far more than is currently developed by existing critical engagements, and that ‘global business space’² needs to be understood through a theoretical lens that enables a conceptualization of the multiple forms of globalized space that constitute much contemporary business activity. In light of this, I propose in this article a reconfigured theoretical framework using four spatial ‘fields’ – material, social, organizational and virtual – to conceptualize how the built environment, firms, technology and mobile social actors are all constituted through increasingly complex spatialities. I argue all of these different spatialities to business activity need to be conceptualized together to provide a holistic understanding of globalized economic space.

The rest of the article develops these arguments in a series of stages. In the next section, I outline the limitations that have been identified with the way in which the spatiality of economic activity is currently conceptualized in the global economy. Drawing on a range of literature concerned with how we might better conceptualise space itself, I argue that – whilst partially successful in this task – existing attempts to theorise the spaces of globalized business activity tend to variously emphasize one theoretical cut on space to the exclusion of other possible approaches. In the third section, I therefore go on to propose an alternative theoretical framework for conceptualizing globalized business spaces and their significance to the contemporary global economy. It outlines how globalized economic activity can be understood as being constituted through four different but overlapping spatial fields and also considers how this framework provides theoretical insight into the complex spatial dimensions that globally-mobile business travellers occupy and move through. Finally, the fourth section draws together a number of conclusions about how better theoretical understandings of global business space might enable a more effective understanding of how materiality, mobility and economic actors interact as global interconnectedness deepens.

Conceptualizing global business spaces

Capitalism [has] produced abstract space ... this space is founded on the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices. Within this space the town – once the forcing house of accumulation ... has disintegrated.

(Lefebvre 1991, p. 53)

The concept of global business space may appear at first straightforward. In simplistic terms, an intuitive definition would be the material locations in which economic activity occurs. This can be coupled with how globalization processes have, in the contemporary era, created planet-scale linkages between these material locations as firms and production have expanded beyond national territorial economies. One of the key premises of the original global city thesis, for example, is that different cities around the planet are fulfilling similar functions in the operation of the global economy, and thus these cities correspond to key global business spaces from which the global economy is managed.

Yet over the last decade or so it has become clear that a purely material conception of space and place is inadequate to capture the spatial constitution of the global economy. The root of the problem lies with the concept of space itself, well-expressed in the above extract from Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), which identifies the way in which capitalism has led to the disintegration of one of the most common forms of place – the town or city (i.e. the urban) – as a demarcateable space. Lefebvre's observation reveals how the range of entities that constitute economic space no longer can be understood as being confined or contained within the material space of towns and cities (if indeed they ever could to some extent). For Lefebvre, the 'space' of capitalism needs to be understood as existing in other spaces – these include at least material, organizational and informational spaces. Consequentially, the global economy therefore needs to be conceptualized in all of these spatial dimensions.

Different strands of social scientific thought have engaged with this problem in recent years, but I want to argue all are – in different ways – insufficient to fully capture the complexity and dynamism of the spatiality of economic activity emerging in the current era of globalization. At least four distinct strands of thinking are important in this respect, and

inform my arguments for a revised epistemological framework for understanding global business spaces which I outline in the next section. The first of these literatures can be described as ‘post-Lefebvrian’ and is concerned with how we conceptualize space. Within human geography, and increasingly in other social science disciplines, there has been a reinvigorated debate that has developed the spatial epistemology of Lefebvre. Lefebvre (1991) argues that ‘all space is socially produced’, and that this production is reciprocal as it also reproduces, mediates and transforms these social relations. By this, he means that ‘modern forms of capitalism produce a certain form of social space’ which he terms ‘abstract space’ (Lefebvre 1991, p. 53). A key distinction within his conception of social space is the triad. First, spatial practice is ‘both the production and reproduction, and the particular locations of each social formation’ (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33). Second, representations of space correspond to ‘conceived space’ which are the spaces executed by planners, designers, architects and engineers. They in essence are deliberate representations of space that embody certain objectives (for example, functionality) in a materialized form. Third, representational spaces are for Lefebvre ‘lived space’ which is phenomenologically experienced space overlaid with ‘imaginary space’. This is the realm where spatial symbols and images are made material (c.f. Merrifield 2006).

Important to my arguments here about global business space are the use this approach has been put to within the management literature. Dale and Burrell (2008) make important propositions in this respect. They argue that Lefebvre’s conception of *spatial practices* provides a basis for understanding how the experience of an organization or of work is built both through an ‘individual habituated’ way of ‘engaging our bodies with a certain materiality’ which amounts to a ‘knowing without knowing’¹ of spatial relations within a particular place, but also the historical embodiment of a workplace and how it is constructed spatially in certain ways so as ‘to produce that particular sort of social space’ (Dale and Burrell 2008, p. 9). They also argue that *representations of space* can be understood as ‘organised space’ and contend it can provide theoretical traction on how ‘the conscious design of workplaces’ can be used ‘to achieve certain values and business goals through the manipulation of space’ (Dale and Burrell 2008, p. 9). This is about more than ‘work ergonomics’ or efficiency,

¹ The concept is Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1973) and seeks to capture how individuals behaviour is informed without conscious reflection by social norms based around structures in society such as gender or class.

insofar as this kind of space is 'integral to capturing hearts and minds' through 'the use of spatial politics in attempts to manufacture both organisational culture and appropriate employee identities' (Dale and Burrell 2008, p. 9). Furthermore, *representational space* can be deployed in the context of workplaces in understanding 'the use of larger offices and plush furniture as status symbols' and also in personal spaces within workplace environments.

The second strand of literature is that which has developed around actor-network approaches to understanding social practice, agency and scale. Actor-network theory (ANT) refers to a school of thought linked to the sociology of scientific knowledge which in particular has been concerned to understand how the social action and the production of knowledge are inseparable from the materiality of the world (Law 1994; Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 1993, 2005). A range of contributors in this field have sought to theorize how social practices cannot be isolated from the material context in which they are undertaken (Callon 1998; Murdoch 1998; Dant 2005). Bruno Latour (2005, p. 4), one of ANT's leading thinkers, thus argues that 'there is no social dimension of any sort, no 'social context' or 'social force', no distinct domain of reality to which the label social or society should be attributed'. ANT thus contends that practice, agency and knowledge are all emergent phenomenon which are constituted through networks of associations between a range of human actors and non-human 'props'.

The management studies literature already discussed has already identified the utility of these arguments in understanding how economic activity is constricted in part through the materiality of organisations (e.g. buildings, technologies). However, drawing on the insights of ANT offers scope for a wider reconceptualization of globalized economic space that extends beyond the boundaries of organizations. By allowing the theorist to trace the multiple associations that constitute all the multiple influences on business practices (many of which are not co-present in physical spaces), ANT-based insight offers a means to overcome the epistemological limitations of existing approaches that focus on material space.

Whilst critics of ANT have argued that this 'tracing' process leads to an undifferentiated pluralist view of entities and agency (Elder-Vass 2008), its insight into the multiple associations that produce socio-economic practice provide an important addition to the epistemological toolkit that will enable a more effective conceptualization of the nature of space which global economic activity occupies.

The third literature is concerned with networks, flows and mobility in relation to globalization (Castells 2001; Sassen 2001). Most important within this literature are the arguments that examine how globalization restructures economic activity and its impact on the built environment and material technology. Of key significance in this respect is the work of Manuel Castells. In his substantial volume of work on ‘global informational capitalism’ (Castells 1989, 2000, 2001), he proposes the concept of the *space of flows* which aims to capture how in the contemporary era ‘a new material basis for time-sharing’ has emerged in social and economic life where ‘the dominant social processes are reorganised and managed through flows’ (Stalder 2006, p. 146). Castells argues that the space of flows has three constitutive dimensions: the ‘circuit of electronic exchanges’ which corresponds to the material global communication and information infrastructure (ICT); the nodes or hubs where multiple services are producing and consumed; and third, the places where people meet and elite constitute themselves (Castells 2001). The space of flows thus enables a ‘purposeful, repetitive, programmable sequence of exchange and interaction between physically disjointed positions held by social actors’ (Castells 2001, pp. 415-418). As a conception of global economic space it does not therefore replace geographical space, but rather by selectively connecting places to one another it changes their functional logic and social dynamics (Stalder 2006). The implication of this argument is that until the globalization of the last thirty years, social and economic practices that relied on physical places for time-sharing were dominant over those built around time-sharing across distances. However, globalization has changed this. The latter form of practices has become increasingly important and consequently has changed the ‘social distance’ between places. Time and space have thus been compressed. As Stalder (2006, p. 147) expresses, the effect on the space of economic action has been a shift from the 1970s idea that ‘the world is shrinking’ to the 1990s by the idea that ‘your office has just expanded’.

Castells sees the key facilitator of this process as the revolutionary information and communications technologies of the last 30 years. It is satellite communication, the internet, wireless communication and so forth which has led to this reconfiguration of the time-space constitution of economic practice. Firms in this context have become ‘network enterprises’ and are not self-contained, but rather operate through a network (or decentralized networks) of many other firms (subcontractors and ancillary enterprises). However, he also points to the role of increasing mobility of social actors as well. In arguing there has been the

emergence of ‘global labor’ he identifies a globalized market for specialized labour. He links this to international migration but does not explore the implications for short-term social practices of ‘doing business’² (i.e. business travel) that characterise a number of industry sectors in terms of globalization (Jones 2002; Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge 2008).

Fourth, and finally, is the literature within human geography (Harvey 1989, 2000; Hamnett 2003⁴), urban studies (Zukin 1991; Cuthbert 2006), planning (Fainstein 1994; Cory and Wilson 2006; Hackler 2006; Ward 2007) and architecture (Handlin 1997; Heynen 2001; Findley 2005) concerned with the form of the built environment and its relationship to economic activity. This vast but diverse literature covers many important issues in relation to the spaces in which economic activity occurs, but three strands particularly inform how global business space might be conceptualized. First is a growing literature concerned with how the form of cities and urban spaces is both shaped by and is shaped by economic practices (Dovey 1999). Second, there is a strand of literature concerning with the micro-spaces of buildings themselves. Centred on architecture (e.g. Schmitt *et al.* 1995; Warren 2002⁵), it also considers how the material built environment of business is undergoing rapid change. This includes those discussed how smart office buildings have developed as a consequence of the ICT needs (Sinopoli 2006), of how factory spaces have similarly been transformed by ICT production systems and new technologies of production such as robotic assembly lines in automobile assembly plants (Ihara 2007). Furthermore, and third, a growing segment of literature has become interested in new temporary and alternative business spaces including hot-desking (Daniels 1994; Stocks 1998), hotel and conference facilities (McNeill and McNamara 2009), trade exhibitions (Maskell *et al.* 2006; Weller 2008), business class work spaces (Breure and van Meel 2003) and home-working (Huws *et al.* 1999; Johnson *et al.* 2007).

Rethinking the spatialities of business

All of the existing theoretical strands discussed thus derive their attempts to understand the spatial constitution of globalized activity take a certain (but differing) epistemological emphasis that has both empirical and theoretical implications. This is of course a natural enough consequence of the process of social scientific theorizing since theoretical approaches are rightly often entwined with the empirical focus of a study. However, I argue in this article that in order to effectively conceptualize the spatial nature of global business

activity, none of these literatures adopts a sufficiently holistic approach to capture the complexity and dynamism of contemporary global economic space. The reason is that in adopting their respective epistemological foci, each of the four literatures discussed circumvents one or other of two (or even both) key epistemological challenges to conceptualizing global economic space. These challenges are interrelated but my argument is that none of the existing approaches I have identified have sought to address both at the same time.

Firstly, on the one hand, there is the challenge of what can be termed the ‘multi-dimensionality’² of global economic space. This is the difficulty inherent in seeking to conceptualize how global economic space has simultaneous material, social, organizational, representational or other attributes. It is certainly true that both the post-Lefebvrian and relational approaches have made significant advances in this respect. Dale and Burrell’s (2008) post-Lefebvrian approach makes an important contribution to incorporating a more effective understanding of material micro-spaces such as those of offices and buildings with social and representational space, but it pays less attention to the socio-material relationships involved in the technologically-mediated spaces of ICT. Similarly, Hess’ (2004) revised concept of rhizomatic embeddedness of regional clusters goes some way to incorporating non-physical concepts of space into theories of global economic space but is less informative on the nature of transnational organizational space that is clearly central to the tranlocality of such clusters (c. f. Jones 2008)

On the other, however, is the converse challenge of capturing the temporality of global economic spaces – notably in terms of the differential significance of their dynamism. Both the built environment and post-Lefebvrian approaches tend to largely circumvent this issue, and whilst some relational contribution such as Hess’ concept of the rhizomatic cluster do address this, it is Castells’ work on the space of flows which is foremost in its focus on meeting this challenge. However, the emphasis on transnational flows, interconnectedness and dynamism have been criticized (c.f. Stalder 2006) for paying too little attention to properties of nodes in this space and that the focus on ‘flow’² (whether that is of money, information or people) emphasizes space as a dimension through which entities move. The problem is that different entities have different capacities to flow, and that nodes have differential forms of resistance. Not all flows are equally mobile. Furthermore, in prioritizing movement, the space of flows directs attention away from the constitutive role of *places* (c.f.

Blatter 2004) in forming the context in which economic actors interact and practices occur. The 'space of flows' approach thus also confronts its limit when faced with the complex differential relations between nodes and the way in which they transform material spaces at several scales (from office micro-space to urban region).

Both of these interrelated epistemological challenges need addressing if better theories of global economic space are to be developed. In this section, I therefore propose a revised theoretical framework for reconceptualizing the spaces of economic activity in the global economy. This framework draws on the insights of existing approaches but seeks to move beyond their limitations by addressing the epistemological limitations outlined above. The approach proposed is based around four spatial fields – as opposed to just types of spaces – which also moves beyond both the post-Lefevrian conceptions of social space as well as Castells' threefold sub-division of the space of flows (c.f. Castells 2001). The aim is transcend existing conceptual categories which emphasize one spatial dimension over others. It is an epistemological approach that seeks to capture how physical space is more than just a piece of territory without losing sight of how often materiality is a key factor, or how informational space has both a social and material dimension to it without over-prioritizing the role of socio-cultural factors over the tangible qualities of informational inputs to economic activity. I am thus arguing that economic activity can be better understood if the theorist utilizes a series spatial fields that are defined by qualitative attributes of different spaces, rather than being demarcated by pre-existing assumptions about what space is or is not, and what limits it is defined by.

The reconfiguration of material space

The first of the four spatial fields is *material business space*. Quite clearly, insofar as business/economic space is currently conceptualized, materiality figures centrally in relation to the built environment. Material spaces have long been the central units of analysis as the ¹location² of economic activity. This material space has often been conceptualised at a number of discreet³ scales². At the micro-scale, buildings are often, although not in every instance, key material business spaces. They provide the stage upon which individual face-to-face interaction occurs, and correspond to different forms of material contexts for economic practices. At the scale of a locality, buildings are taken to exist in more extensive territorial economic spaces – central business districts (CBDs) (Murphy 2007) or technology parks (c.f.

Walcott 2003). Beyond this scale, there are towns and cities themselves. A considerable literature discusses the materiality of city regions, firm clusters (Bathelt *et al.* 2004; Bresnahan and Gambardella 2004) or industrial districts (Amin and Thrift 1992; Hsu 2004) and seeks to understand how it shapes economic outcomes. Recent contributions to the globalization debate have argued that these spatial scales overlap, and begun to question concepts of scale in themselves (Marston *et al.* 2005). Ash Amin (2002) argues, for example, that globalization is ‘perforating’ conventional scales (the local, the regional, the national) and that a scalar epistemology is inadequate for conceptualizing the nature of spatiality in the current era (see also Jones 2008).

I want to apply this argument to the issue of how we understand the material spaces of economic activity, and develop it much further. The key proposition is that the transnationalization of economic activity is *reconfiguring* the nature of the associations that constitute the material spaces that provide the context for economic practices. The implication of this is that economic practice escapes conventional scalar categories, and that material business space thus needs likewise to be understood as bound into relations and associations which are not only no longer contained within contiguous physical space – as a growing literature recognizes (Dicken and Malmberg 2001; Yeung 2005; Faulconbridge 2008) – but whose materiality or territoriality provides an increasingly partial insight into to the nature of economic activity. Obviously the built environment of, for example, a city or business park exists in contiguous physical space, but the point is that the associations which shape the nature, form and relevance of materiality to understanding economic activity do not map onto this material space in any straightforward manner. The materiality occupied by global economic activity thus needs to be conceptualized as a relational and topological context whose constitutive associations transcend (rather than just ‘perforate’ as Amin suggests) the ‘conventional’ spatial scales in which business activity is often deemed to occur.

At least three forms of material business space are worth distinguishing as undergoing important reconfiguration in the context of growing global interconnectedness. First, much economic activity continues to be undertaken in *formal material spaces*. These are the familiar physical spaces within the built environment which are most readily identified as the space of business activity including offices, meeting rooms, assembly-lines, workshops and research laboratories. Their primary purpose, reflected in their architecture, design and construction, is to provide a physical context for economic practices. Using an ANT-based

epistemological perspective, however, I suggest that formal material spaces of business need to be conceptualized as material and physical contexts whose form is bound into, influenced and in part constituted by associations with distant objects, organizations or social actors (c.f. Murdoch 1998, 2006).

Two examples illustrate this argument. The first is the materiality of corporate office spaces in (global) cities which needs to be understood in relation to the transnationalization of business activity. The internal form of office buildings in many CBDs has been radically reconfigured over the last two decades to reflect changing working practices and the transformations associated with globalizing organizations (Castells 2001; Jones 2003). Furthermore, as the architectural literature identifies, the construction of ‘smart buildings’ with internal infrastructure (cable conduits, server rooms, secure data storage facilities) is bound into the needs of global informational business activity (Drewer and Gann 1994). Such transformations of material business space come in a variety of forms. In finance, over the last fifteen years the material form of trading floors in investment banks in New York, Hong Kong or Frankfurt has been transformed. This transformation has certainly in part been driven by changing forms of corporate organizations in response to the wider imperatives of industry globalization. However, new ICT has both facilitated an organizational response to globalization as well as fostering new forms of working practice which in turn are enacted in a reconfigured material formal space. Open-plan desk layouts have been reconfigured, and the material space of offices altered to enable employees to interact with both people face-to-face and new forms of ICT technology. In this way the material micro-space has become configured in a manner that is bound into the needs of greater use of distanced communications in the work process and changing organizational form. Similarly, in legal services the need for secure confidential meeting rooms with secure ICT facilities has led to the internal reconfiguration of existing floors in buildings, or the construction of entirely new offices. Another example (albeit an extreme one) is the growing practice in several retail financial industries for office buildings to be *identical* across the globe. Firms such as Bank of America and Capital One have constructed buildings of the same dimensions, material and functional layout in the US, Europe and Asia in order to improve a range of business practices. An employee from an office in the US will thus find upon visiting a European office that meeting rooms, call-centres, IT services or the office of a divisional Director are in the same place. Whilst extreme, the point is that these formal

material business spaces have been shaped through a complex set of distanced relations between far distant locations in geographical terms.

Second are the *informal material spaces* where economic practice is undertaken. Geographers and urban theorists have for some time pointed to these spaces as important in the agglomeration effect which has caused the concentration of command and control functions in corporate head-offices in global cities such as London or New York (Thrift 1994; Sassen 2001; Short 2004). Bars, restaurants, clubs and other physical contexts for business activity are seen as important in fostering rich information exchange through face-to-face interaction which develops key trust relationships between business actors (Jones 1998). However, there has been little direct empirical enquiry concerned with what kinds of practice occur in these informal material spaces. It is largely assumed that face-to-face interaction fosters trust, information exchange and other intangible qualities that lubricate economic activity (c.f. Storper and Venables 2004). Informal spaces have tended to be conceptualized as supplementary business spaces that are of lesser importance than formal material spaces of board rooms, offices or factories. Furthermore, they are again generally understood as to be material space *in* places. Business executives go to a restaurant with colleagues, or to the golf club and so forth.

In contrast, I want to argue that these informal material spaces need to be understood both as global spaces and as important spaces in which economic practice occurs. These are global spaces because, as the urban studies literature has documented, the material landscapes of leisure space is becoming increasingly intertwined (c.f. Brenner 2002). Bars, restaurants, clubs and other informal spaces (c. f. Cohen and Prusak 2001; Amin and Cohendet 2004) where business people undertake work are bound into globalized patterns of consumption and cultural flows that make it impossible to understand these material spaces as isolated places separate from the context of wider globalization. Likewise, [the](#) global business class represent an important constituent group of globalized and globally-mobile consumers² (Sklair 2005; Thrift 2005) whose expectations in consuming leisure spaces are bound into globalized cultural relationships. To contextualize this with examples, the atria, coffee-shops, gyms, bars and restaurants or the lobbies of a Marriott or Crowne

² These two groups are not the same as each other. Individuals can be immobile but embedded in global cultural flows. Those who are part of the global business class are likely to be both.

Plaza business hotel in Beijing, São Paulo or Dubai strongly reflect the consumption preferences of an global business class, the leisure spaces (bars, clubs restaurant) across these cities are also increasingly shaped (perhaps to a lesser extent) by the expectations and preferences of transnational business workers. As global business travel (mobility) has increased with the transnationalization of firms and their operations, informational nature of the economy has fuelled a simultaneous shift out of formal business spaces. Thus, global informal business spaces are greater in number, more diverse and not restricted to purpose-built leisure spaces (business hotel bars restaurants or the informal spaces in purpose-built convention centres). This elision between economic and leisure space is evidence in the growing recognition of the intertwined nature of business travel and tourism (Swarbrooke and Horner 2001).

Third, the growing use of *temporary* or *alternative material spaces* linked to the growing mobility of business employees in a wide range of industries. As economic activity is transnationalizing in the global economy, corporate practices are making growing use of new temporary and “in-between” material business spaces that have been constructed intentionally as well as being improvised out of necessity. Taking the former, intentionally-constructed material spaces first, the last couple of decades have witnessed investment in and construction of new material business spaces in “in-between” locations in order to facilitate transnational economic activity. These have been created in response to the need for employees of transnational firms to undertake business both “on the move” and in multiplying number of different physical locations. Industry transnationalization is behind this change in all sectors. There are again a large number of specific factors driving this use of temporary or alternative business spaces, but the category straddles both purpose-built and adapted material spaces. With regard to those which are purpose-built, the enormous growth in the construction of micro-spaces to support business practices out of the office or factory is a key aspect of this development. As business employee mobility has increased, a range of new micro-spaces have been constructed. The most obvious are probably new airport meeting facilities so that work can be undertaken in “interim” locations. The further development of work space in first class and business class cabins in aircraft also even make it possible for some work to be undertaken during air travel.

However, probably more significant is how the hospitality sector has also responded to this with the growth of meeting room and business facilities in a growing number of hotels

(not just dedicated high profile business hotels) (c.f. McNeill and McNamara 2009). An example is the provision of meeting rooms in new European 'budget' hotels or motels (firms such as Travelodge, Ibis, Premierlodge) that provide temporary business spaces across road transport networks. This enables business travellers to meet in 'in-between' places rather than in their own offices. There is evidence of more specific 'hot-office' provision by dedicated firms in global cities, where a full temporary office facility can be hired out by firms for mobile employees to use on a short-term basis as required. Finally, a growing literature has also indicated the growing prevalence and use of trade fairs, business exhibitions and conventions in the global economy which also represent another form of temporary material space in which transnational business is taking place (Maskell *et al.* 2006; Weller 2008). Whilst trade fairs have been a longstanding feature of international business, ~~the size, scale and reach of these events is being transformed by globalization, as well as function they perform for firms.~~ Trade fairs have become material spaces in which global-scale deal-making and business activity is taking place, as well as rather than simply as an advertising and promotional event.

The decentralization of social space

A second spatial field is *social business space*. This concept has its foundations in arguments already proposed and developed to a considerable extent within the social scientific literature concerned with transnational business activity. Castells argues that firms have become network enterprises where ICT is facilitating transnational social networks within and between firms. Relatedly, within management studies and economic geography there is a growing literature discussing the nature and significance of intra- and inter-firm social contact networks to transnational business activity (Brown and Duguid 2000; Morgan *et al.* 2001; Yeung 2002). This socio-economic literature has established the importance in many industries of social networks as the means for acquiring and retaining business, as a means of knowledge transfer, and as central to innovation (Gertler 2003). Another strand of the literature discusses the development of a transnational business class (Sklair 2001, 2005) who share values, ideas and lifestyles and who fill the informal material business spaces of global cities, business class lounges and golf clubs discussed above. Yet, again, I want to develop this concept of a global social business space further. My central proposition is that globalization (manifest as a range transformation producing societal interconnectedness) is

producing a decentralization of the social spaces in which economic activity occurs. By decentralization, I refer to the transformation of social spaces through which economic activity occurs. This transformation centres on a shift away from dense, formal and materially discreet spaces of intensive co-presence to a range of decentred, diffuse and networked forms of social space where the boundary between formal and informal has become blurred.

The globalized social spaces of economic activity can usefully be divided into three interrelated sub-categories based around three distinct dimensions to the way in which economic relationships are (re)produced. I argue that the transnationalization of economic activity is producing a decentralisation in each of these dimensions. The first is what I term ~~interactive space~~². There has been much debate within the social scientific literature of the differential functions and role played by various forms of social interaction in the context of a globalizing economy. Interaction comes in a variety of forms, reflected in the concern with face-to-face interactions, meetings, networks of interaction, team working, project working and communities of practice. A growing segment of the literature has demonstrated that face-to-face interactions are no less significant in the contemporary global economy despite the emergence of new ICT (Storper and Venables 2004; Gertler 2004). In fact, new ICT has in some cases been shown to increase not reduce the need for face-to-face interaction, with all the costs and difficulties this poses as firms and industries transnationalize (Lian and Denstadli 2004). The consequence is that interactive space becomes blended between face-to-face interactions which are supported and facilitated by an increasingly number of ICT mediated interactions. The effect is to decentralize the space in which social interaction occurs, as distant individuals are drawn into interactions and material spaces such as offices no longer constitute the primary material space within which business practices occur (c.f. Sassen 2008~~7~~). Such a concept is, in part, captured in ideas about transnational social contact networks, but the metaphor of the network itself emphasizes the static nature of social space rather than the dynamic processes of social interaction that (re)produce global social spaces.

An example drawn from my research on transnational legal service firms provides insight here. This recent study examined how law firms based in the City of London were seeking to internationalize their operations, primarily by moving into European and Asian markets (Jones 2005, 2007). This strategy has resulted in a rapid growth in employee mobility

and a reconfiguration of office space as lawyer teams spent more time working abroad in client offices of temporary meeting spaces. Furthermore, it also is producing a decentralization of the interactive spaces that business activity occupied as face-to-face contact within London offices was replaced with a mixture of face-to-face and other forms of interaction in the new temporary material spaces where work was being undertaken (meeting facilities in European cities or in the offices of client firms overseas). The spatiality of interaction in this industry is thus being transformed to a new decentred form rather than being organized primarily around interactions in an easily demarcated arena of co-present interaction in London.

The second dimension to social business space is knowledge space. Again social scientific theorization has recognised the key significance of knowledge in contemporary economic activity, but it has struggled to understand the space that knowledge occupies within firms, firm networks and (territorially-defined) economies. In this respect, Amin and Cohendet (2004, p. 86) make an important argument when they contend that the spatial form of knowledge in economic activity has been under-theorised. They argue that the ‘spaces of knowledge and learning’ as ‘the organised spaces of varying length, shape and duration in which actants – human and transhuman³ – are mobilised and aligned in the pursuit of particular corporate goals’ (Amin and Cohendet 2004, p. 87). This ‘knowledge space’ depends on the circumstances and resources at hand which includes face-to-face and other forms of interaction, as well as employee mobility and social networks. However, I want to focus in particular on their key argument that the spaces of knowing need to be understood in topological terms so that distant sites and actors are constitutive of this kind of space in the contemporary global economy. Building on this perspective, my proposition is that knowledge space – as a form of globalized social business space – must be conceptualized in topological terms that capture the distanced flows of ideas and learning that economic actors are embedded in. Individual and collective business actors produce and circulate knowledge through knowledge spaces that do not map neatly onto demarcated physical spaces *or* organizational spaces. Knowledge is intrinsically a social phenomenon, globalization means that its spatiality is *increasingly* different from the entities that have been

³ ANT theorists argue that agency resides within networks that include but cannot be reduced purely to humans, and that it is a product of the network of ‘actants’ that collectively produce the capacity to act.

conventionally understood as producing or containing it (individuals, communities, firms and clusters etc). Whilst a growing literature on knowledge has identified this issue (Gertler 2003; Amin and Cohendet 2004; Grabher and Ibert 2006), its arguments tend to remain restricted analysis of the role of knowledge rather on wide-ranging debates about the nature of global economic space.

Third, globalized social business space needs to be understood as having a cultural dimension. As the literature concerned with the nature of globalization has articulated, representation, values and behavioural norms are increasingly products of complex global-scale flows. Whilst the development of global cultural commonalities has been demonstrated as amounting to far more than the development of homogenous global cultural forms (c.f. Hopper 2007), a growing interest has developed across several social science disciplines in the concept of global business culture and, in the context of firms, of global corporate culture (Alvesson 2002; Trompenaars & Prudhomme 2004). My proposition is that globalized social spaces are important in creating and maintaining cultural forms (or ~~‘tropes’~~²) that enable transnational firms to cohere as organizations at the global scale (c.f. Jones 2003). Transnational corporate employees are thus increasingly occupying social spaces where cultural interactions and exchanges produce accepted ways of doing business, of interacting with other economic actors and of facilitating economic activity in differing national or local societies (c.f. Gertler 2004). Furthermore, the cultural dimension to globalized social business space involves a series of representational and symbolic spaces where the emerging transnational business class share and learn common values and behavioural norms beyond the scale of firms or organizations. Cultural values are (re)produced in physical contexts provided by both semi-formal spaces such as education and training facilities (Hall 2008), and also informal material spaces including clubs, bars and even private domestic space. As with interactive and knowledge forms of social space, cultural values are (re)produced through but not contained exclusively within material office buildings, or formal business interactions or easily demarcated social contact networks. Nor are they contained in the space of firms or other organizations, which leads to me to the next spatial field that constitutes global economic activity.

The porosity of organizational space

The third spatial field to global business I want to propose is thus organizational space. As a form of spatiality, a focus on organizations and their spatiality is useful because they represent key locations of agency in the global economy. However, this is not to argue for conceiving of organizational business space as ‘firm space.’² Whilst (transnational) firms are key agents in the global economy, they are not the only organizational actors in business activity that require attention. For a start, an increasing proportion of global economic activity involves firms providing goods or services to other organizations as customers or clients. These clients/customers also correspond to important organizational spaces in which economic activity is undertaken. Furthermore, other ‘non-firm’² organizational spaces are also important – for example, regulatory and governmental organizations. Yet extending conceptualization of the organizational spaces in which business activity is constituted beyond the organizational space of firms is crucial in understanding the nature of agency in the global economy. As relational and actor-network approaches have shown, the agency that firms as actors have to undertake economic activity is bound into a complex network of associations with all kinds of other entities (most of which are organizations) (Ettlinger 2003; Yeung 2005). Using organizational space as a concept to capture the multiple actors involved in business activity can thus provide a tool to isolate theoretically the most important influences that shape business activity in an increasingly complex global economy.

In this respect, I make two key propositions concerning the nature of the globalized organizational business space in which economic activity occurs. First, globalized organizational business spaces correspond to much more than the material spaces occupied by organizations. As Dale and Burrell (2008) argue, organizations as entities occupy a variety of different spaces. They clearly do exist in physical spaces – firms have offices and production spaces – but also as social, representational, cultural and governance spaces. As a spatial field, therefore, globalized organizational business space clearly overlaps with other spatial fields perhaps more self-evidently than those discussed so far. This does not however diminish the utility of conceptualising such spaces but rather provides scope to develop new concepts that capture how different forms of organizational space shape business activity. Drawing on the social dimension to global organizational space creates the capacity to understand how social contact networks within and between firms are instrumental in producing deals or investments. For example, the role played by investment banks in Europe and North America in the investment made by transnational firm is illustrative (Jones 2003).

Examining the role played by the banks showed that the strategic decisions by the senior management in large transnational firms involve a range of different organizations in both the decision-making and implementation process. The advisory and facilitatory role of the banks is supplemented by consultancy and legal service firms based in leading global cities, as well as host-country contractor firms. In the case of TNCs making investments in different part of the world, the globalized organizational space that these business practices occupy exhibit a complex spatiality. Furthermore, the boundaries between one organization (the investing firm), the banks and other stakeholder organizations are blurred.

This leads directly to a second proposition in relation to globalized organizational business space: that it needs to be conceptualised as being ‘porous’. The term is used to denote the difficulty of defining the boundaries of organizations, and the way in which the globalization of economic activity has further complicated this issue. As a number of theorists have argued, the boundaries of organizations are harder to demarcate than they might first appear (Taylor and Scott and Spicer 2007), and as a consequence any concept of the space that an organization occupies is equally hard to define around rigid boundaries. I would suggest that organizations may be better conceptualized as a density of social agency. Individuals move in and out of organizational spaces in both physical and social sense, as also does knowledge, cultural values and power relations. In thinking about firm as the key organizations in economic activity, transnationalization means ever more that global organizational space needs to be understood as porous, insofar as it is unstable, constituted through Castells’ space of flows and its boundaries blurred. Organizations have arguably always exhibited such characteristics to a degree, but as economic activity has globalized the porosity of organizational space has increased. To return to the above example, those employees working for TNCs, investment banks, other business service firms and contractor firms are becoming more mobile within their own organizations, and between stakeholder organizations involved in global investment activity. Staff move between firms, clients and other stakeholders in a range of ways that transmits knowledge and fosters shared practices (Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge 2008). The organizational spaces of the globalized economy are thus not spaces that remain constant, but rather have shifting configurations with individuals and groups of actors moving between and not always exclusively occupying one organization’s space.

The incursion of virtual space

In common with Castells' conception of the ICT-constituted nature of the space of flows, economic practices have become increasingly constituted in *virtual spaces* that are the product of new ICT technologies and systems. However, I would argue that this fourth spatial field needs to be conceptualized as more than simply the role *attributed* to ICT in the concept of the space of flows. In that sense, this concept both extends the scope and reconfigures the rather technology-centric conception of the space of flows by Castells (c.f. Stalder 2006, pp. 28-33). As a spatial field, the key argument is that *virtual business space* is not just a form of globalized economic space that permeates other distinct 'real' spaces² of economic practice, but is itself a constitutive dimension to an increasing number of economic activities in the global economy. Information and codified knowledge are both held and transmitted in virtual space, and economic practices themselves (at least particularly) occur as 'events'² in virtual space. There needs, therefore, to be the theoretical scope to understand how economic practices are in part undertaken in and through this space, and that such understanding is not developed in the concept of the space of flows. Furthermore, rapidly developing ICT has led – within recent decades – to a situation where globalized virtual business space incurs on an ever greater proportion of economic practices. This goes much further than Castells' generalized conception of ICT in the informational economy. Virtual business spaces are of course created and reproduced by ICT, but they are not contributing to a shift in the spatiality of economic practice in 'real' material or social spaces. Rather, they have become dynamic loci of economic activity in and of themselves.

In this respect, three important features about the nature of virtual business space in the context of globalizing business activity are important. First, in the contemporary global economy, the development of *new and more sophisticated ICT* is extending the scope of virtual spaces to an increasing number of different economic practices. The proliferation of mobile communication technologies such as Blackberries and Wireless Mobile Internet enables more and more economic practices in more industries to be undertaken (in part) in virtual spaces. Communication between business managers is possible for more of the working day, or during physical travel in a way that it previously was not. Even in the last five years, there is research evidence that video-conferencing technologies are being used increasingly by firms in all sectors, and that improved capacities with this technology have widened the extent and scope of usage (Lian and Denstadl 2004). However, contrary to earlier arguments

that video-conferencing would replace co-presence and face-to-face, the opposite appears to be the case. There is some evidence that more sophisticated video-conferencing is contributing to more not less international business travel as the number and type of business practices video-conferencing can facilitate increases. This form of ICT replaces some forms of face-to-face interaction but in facilitating corporate globality, it also increases the need for other forms of face-to-face between globally scattered actors.

Second, and relatedly, developments in the sophistication of *existing ICT* – and in particular the internet and its capacity in terms of its bandwidth and speed – are facilitating further incursion ICT into economic practices that are already constituted in virtual space. Within firms corporate intranets have become more sophisticated, more extensive in their repositories of knowledge and better able to facilitate a wider range of working practices than even ten years ago. There has consequently been a growth in both the number and types of economic practices which in part occupy virtual spaces, and equally important the *degree* to which virtual spaces incurs on existing economic practices has developed further. Using the example of legal services once again, ten years ago it was impossible for mobile lawyers travelling to a client firm overseas to undertake a range of work practices whilst out of the office. The need for confidentiality and information security precluded discussions about contracts, answering queries from clients and a host of other activities because the virtual spaces in which these activities might have been undertaken were not sufficiently secure. Recent advancements and new technologies in mobile ICT have solved many of these problems (Jones 2007) and have facilitated changing working practices associated with firm and sector globalization. The result is an increased the degree to which virtual space incurs in the day-to-day activities of transnational legal service firms and their employees.

Third, virtual space is the most novel form of global business space insofar as it is only within the last three decades that ICT capacity to permeate material, social and organizational spaces has existed to any significant extent. Late Victorian business relied to some extent on telegraphic communication, and it is certainly true that in the early twentieth century new forms of an earlier wave of ICT (e.g., filing cabinets, ticker-tape machines, typewriters, stenographs) incurred into economic practices. However, as Castells has argued at some length, the impacts of computer-based ICT in the last three decades has been far more wide-reaching on all aspects of economic activity than any previous wave of ICT innovation. Given the sheer speed of technological change, this means that the development

of globalized virtual business spaces requires special attention. There is a much longer history to the ~~way in which~~^{nature of role of} the other spatial fields ~~have evolved~~. I have proposed in economic development than with contemporary ICT-produced virtual spaces, and the implementation, opportunities and impacts of the ICT revolution remains more uncertain and unclear between firms, industries and economies. In that sense, whilst globalized virtual spaces of economic practice are increasingly permeating the global economy, the direction and consequences of the growing importance of this spatial field are the most difficult to predict.

Conclusions: thinking beyond travellers and material spaces

The spatiality of globalized business activity needs to be reconceptualized. This is the overriding argument developed in this article. Whilst the globalization debate across the social sciences has gone a long way to identifying a number of different dimensions to the nature of the spaces in which economic activity occurs, there is a need to bring diverse strands of thinking together in order to understand the nature of economic practices in the contemporary global economy. The spaces of global business constitute much more than the gleaming metal-and-glass skyscrapers to be found in the business districts of global cities across the planet, or the growing number of business travellers moving transnationally to maintain contact networks with key actors in leading firms in various industries. In a special issue of this journal concerned with business travel, this is ^a key issue. Conceptualized as the global mobility of employees as economic actors, business travel represents one of the key economic practices that needs to be reconceptualized in a spatial epistemology that can capture the multiple global economic spaces that travellers occupy. Business travel cannot be fully understood purely as physical mobility between material spaces for the purpose of specific face-to-face interactions in those material spaces. The development of transnational firms and the global informational economy has rendered such a conception problematic.

In this article I have therefore tried to draw together a number of different (although often related) lines of theoretical argument from urban studies, geography, management studies and sociology in order to propose a theoretical framework for thinking about the multiple ^{‘spatial fields’} that global economic activity occupies. Business travellers pass through and occupy many of these spatial fields, often more than one at the same time. In developing a theoretical framework that can appreciate this, my aim has therefore been to

create the possibility of more effectively understanding how the spatiality of economic practices shapes the nature of economic outcomes. Business travel is a key example of one of these practices, but more generally, this framework aims to create the theoretical space for better conceptualizing how the physical mobility of economic actors, the built environment, transnational organizational form, ICT and social and cultural factors are all constitutive of an increasing proportion of activity in the contemporary economy. To a large extent, the social scientific literature has only partially appreciated the extent to which the spatiality of economic activity has been transformed. Often still prioritizing material and territorial spaces, the debate needs to more seriously engage with the multiple spatial dimensions that are constitutive of economic activity and actors. Whilst debates about the development of transnational production facilities, GPNs or the built environment of global cities have been undoubtedly important, understandings of the globalized nature of economic space needs to be reconfigured to capture the complexity of ⁴translocality². Material economic spaces both shape and are shaped by the form of business practices, organizational form and social actors, and globalization is even destabilising conventional conceptions of what represents a material or organizational space in which economic practices occurs.

Thus, whilst business travel is an important and powerful example of the limitations to understanding globalized economic space in existing approaches, the wider argument applies more generally to how all economic practices are conceptualized in the contemporary global economy. Trying to understand economic practices in isolation, without appreciating the multiple spaces economic actors occupy and move through, can only reduce the capacity of theory to capture the complexity of factors influencing the success or failure of firms in all sectors. Hopefully the framework proposed in this article goes some way to opening up a more radical epistemological debate about how we understanding the spatiality of the globalized economy.

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